

Senators urged not to repeal policy on abortions in military hospitals

WASHINGTON - Requiring personnel in military hospitals to perform or participate in abortions would place "a very heavy burden" on those in the armed forces who value human life, Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services told U.S. senators.

"The United States is one of the few nations in the world based on self-evident principles: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," the archbishop said in a June 17 letter. "Constraining the very men and women committed to defending those principles for the rest of the country to act against their consciences violates the foundation of this republic."

Archbishop Broglio was commenting on an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2011 that would require military hospitals to perform abortions in both domestic and overseas military bases.

He was joined in opposition to the amendment by Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities, who said in a June 29 letter to senators that the proposal breaks with long-standing federal and military policies on government promotion of abortion.

The cardinal also dismissed suggestions that the amendment was "moderate" because it requires patients at military facilities to pay for their own abortions.

"Which is a more direct government involvement in abortion: That the government reimburses someone else for having done an abortion, or that the government performs the abortion itself and accepts payment for doing so?" he asked.

"This amendment presents Congress with the very straightforward question whether it is the task of our federal government to directly promote and facilitate abortions," Cardinal DiNardo wrote. "During the recent health care reform debate, the president and congressional leadership assured us that they agree it is not."

Proposed by Sen. Roland Burris, D-Ill., the amendment would repeal a ban on abortion in military medical facilities in effect since 1988, with the exception of 1993-95. The prohibition on using Department of Defense funds to pay for those abortions would remain in effect.

The amendment was adopted by a 15-12 vote by the Senate Armed Services Committee May 27. Consideration by the full Senate was expected later this summer; the final Senate bill also must be reconciled with the House version passed May 28, which does not include repeal of the abortion ban.

Archbishop Broglio, who said he spoke "as one concerned with the moral well-being of the armed forces," said the proposed policy reversal "would contravene our military health care providers' commitment to defending and protecting human life."

"Military hospitals have an outstanding record of saving life, even in the most challenging times and conditions," he said. "Their commitment extends to the smallest of human beings. Please allow them to continue abiding by these values."

As passed by the Senate Armed Services Committee, the defense spending bill also would repeal the policy banning gays from serving openly in the military, which Archbishop Broglio also has opposed.

The repeal would take place six months after the president, secretary of defense and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had certified to Congress that there has been "a comprehensive review" of the implications of the repeal; that "the necessary policies and regulations" had been prepared; and that implementation of the new policy was "consistent with the standards of military readiness, military effectiveness, unit cohesion, and recruiting and retention."

In a statement posted on the archdiocese's website June 1, Archbishop Broglio said that "sacrificing the moral beliefs of individuals" in response to "merely political considerations is neither just nor prudent especially for the armed forces at a time of war."

He said Catholic military chaplains had expressed concern about the possible repeal of the 1993 legislation widely known as "don't ask, don't tell" and had requested

guidance about what to do if it is lifted.